

# Mitch Alexander's SOFTBALL ACADEMY

## *Collected Data Proves Value of Training Tool*

This fall, 70% of my 12u team did not return for various reasons. I wrote about this in Issue 13. We put a lot of effort into coaching our spring team players, starting last winter and then playing many tournaments and scrimmages last spring. Faced with a team of players who were not used to our quick-paced drills and training methods, we were very concerned about bringing the new recruits up to speed quickly. I started looking for a “silver bullet,” a tool or set of tools and methods that would quickly get these new girls up to the same level as the rest of the team. Our teams have always been known for our offensive power – typically our girls can hit up and down the batting order.

Photo by Mitch Alexander

After weeks of searching, one tool stuck out – the Sling Pitcher ([www.slingpitcher.com](http://www.slingpitcher.com)). I saw it advertised on the Internet. It looked very interesting. Originally, I saw it as a manual pitching machine, but my coaches and I have been “manual” pitching machines for our batting practice sessions for years! One area of concern for both our new players and our original group is that the pitching speed is increasing each year. Since we are a second year 12u team, we will move up to 14u by next fall. This means that in



order for our team to succeed, the girls need to be able to hit faster pitches. This is where I thought the Sling Pitcher could help us. I spoke with Sling Pitcher about their product and they chose to sponsor my team.

The Sling Pitcher complete system (Sling Pitcher, Sling Guard, and Sling Turret) arrived about a week later. We unboxed it and set it up in my basement. We tried it out with a few foam balls that came with it. Right away I started thinking of the ways we could use this training tool. I couldn't wait to get it out on the field at a live practice. A few days later, I had my opportunity. I had one of my coaches meet me at the practice field a half hour early to help assemble the Sling Pitcher. Even though I had already taken it out of the box and pre-assembled it, I was concerned that it would take some time to get it put back together and for my coaches to learn how to set it up as well. What I found was, it took less than 10 minutes the first time, and now all of my coaches can assemble the Sling Pitcher in under 5 minutes. Breakdown is even less and that includes packing it away in the carrying cases.

The heart of the tool is essentially a giant sling shot. The key selling feature is that it allows coaches to provide quality pitches to their players a high majority of the time. The importance here is QUALITY pitches. Typically coaches can only throw 40-50% strikes from behind a pitching screen. The Sling Pitcher also allows these pitches to be placed – high, low, inside, outside. You can also “throw” different types of pitches. If a batter has a problem hitting inside pitches, you can keep throwing inside pitches, one right after the other. You can have training sessions for the whole team to work on hitting curve balls, drop balls, outside pitches, etc.

It throws real softballs (11” or 12”) not composite bat ruining dimple balls up to 55mph. I used a Pocket Radar to clock the balls at 49-51 mph during our practices. These pitches are slightly faster than what our girls are typically seeing in games. The Sling Pitcher is placed at the correct distance from the batter or slightly closer. The closer you place it, the less reaction time the batter has which approximates faster pitches. The unit can also throw foam balls or whiffle balls much faster (70mph) as they are lighter than regular softballs. Another benefit is the tool can be used for baseballs as well as softballs, and throws the lighter baseballs much faster.

Its use is not limited to pitching. You can use the Sling Pitcher anywhere you need to throw or bat a ball. It comes with extension arms to allow you to pull the sling down and send a rocket of a pop-up into the outfield. You can use it with your catchers to pepper them with practice balls and work on their positioning and blocking. You can use it to run infield practice and place the ball exactly where you want it – grounders, line drives, or popups. You can use it with your pitcher to simulate the ball being hit up the middle back at them. There are so many ways to use this tool.

I have been keeping careful hitting stats on my team this season. The results were amazing and after analyzing the collected data, the results make sense. We used the Sling Pitcher approximately once a week over a seven week period. We found that the Sling Pitcher allowed our coaches to “throw” accurate pitches 80-90% of the time. That means at least 8 out of 10 pitches were placed where intended. While accurate, the Sling Pitcher also adds some variability that an electric pitching machine doesn’t have – coaches may pull the sling back less or more which changes the speed of the pitch and the softball trajectory. Coaches may pull the sling back slightly more to one side or the other compared with the previous pitch, which results in the softball being thrown more inside or outside than the previous pitch. It seems to approximate live pitching more accurately than an electric pitching machine.

Many of our Sling Pitcher practices involved the following drill. A practice of 12 players can get through this drill in 1.5 hours. All players get to bat and play all infield and all outfield positions:

- 4 infielders in place
- 3 outfielders in place
- No pitcher or catcher
- Remaining players getting ready to bat
- Batting coach working with batters

Batter gets two buckets of balls (approx. 3 dozen balls) which results in approximately 29-30 quality pitches

Batter hits through the two buckets of balls. On the last two balls, the batter is instructed to “run it out”

Fielders field the batted balls and make the plays as instructed by the coaching staff

After each batter completes their BP, all fielders pick up the balls and return them to the two buckets and then to the Sling Pitcher operator. All fielders then rotate. The last batter takes first base (this gets the batters to hustle back to the dugout and back out ready to field), and infielders shift to the left. The third baseman goes to right field, and the left fielder comes in to the last on deck position.

Here’s the actual results I found after seven weeks of use (we posted a 12-2 record over this time period, with the two losses early in the season):

My leadoff batter, who started the season as my most consistent batter, increased her batting average by 100 points! From a .400 to a .500 batting average!

My number two batter, increased her batting average by a whopping 269 points! She went from a .364 to a .633 batting average.

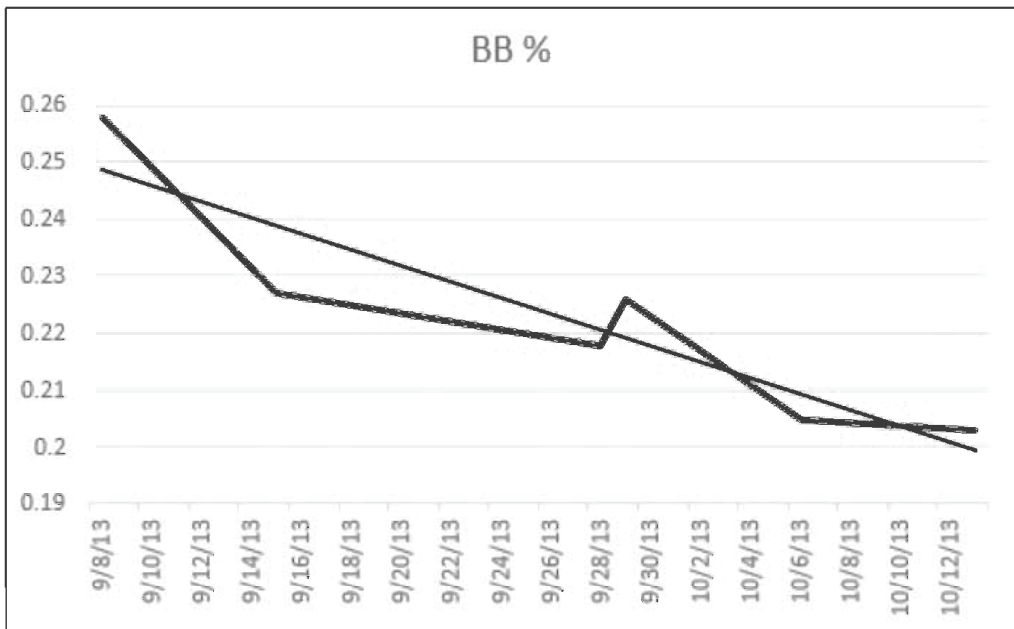
I recently promoted a batter to the top part of the batting order who improved her batting so dramatically, that she earned a new spot in the batting order. She improved her batting an amazing 365 points! From .222 to .587. She was also able to work on slashing at batting practice which added another dimension to her batting skills.

My cleanup batter, who was my most consistent power hitter, improved by 40points. From .556 to .595.

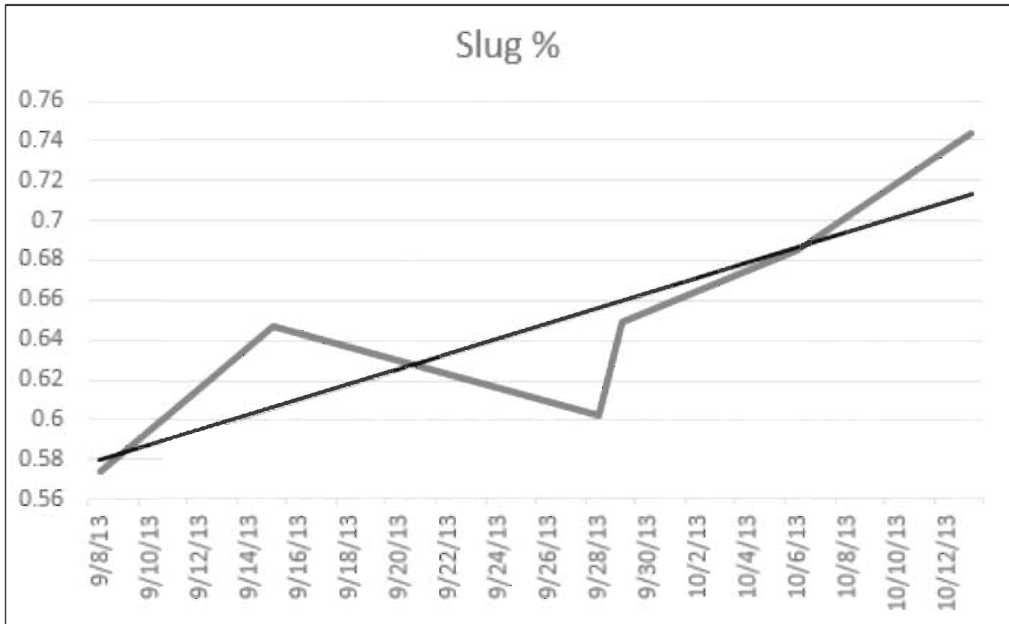
Another power hitter improved from .286 to .412 over the seven week period. A gain of 126 points. She racked up 6 singles, 3 doubles, 2 triples, 3 homeruns, and 16 walks.

The team averaged a 100 point increase in their batting averages over the seven week period. Similarly, the team averaged a 60 point increase in their on base percentage.

Our first doubleheader during the 7 week period resulted in 18 hits. The team averaged 29.8 hits per doubleheader since then with a period ending rate of 47 hits in the last doubleheader!



Over the period, walks went down by about 6%. Most likely, these walks were avoided by more confidence in batting.



We also enjoyed an increase of 18% in slugging percentage. This means that not only did our girls get on base more often on more hits, but the quality of the hits were better which resulted in extra bases earned.

Our team showed impressive improvements in their batting in a short 7 week period. An average of 100 point improvement in batting average is the difference between a middle of the pack team and champions. Several players take private batting lessons. These skilled batters showed the least amount of improvement as predicted. The results show that this tool is worth using and really does work as advertised. It's relatively easy to set up, easy to use, safe when used with the Sling Guard pitching screen, and easy to break down. I'm looking at getting a

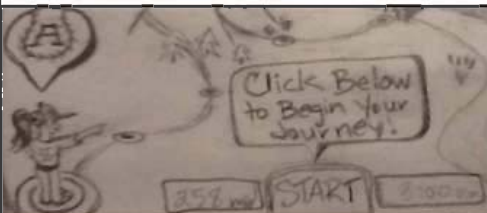


second unit so we can run two lines at a time in fielding drills, or run hitting and fielding drills simultaneously via multiple Sling Pitcher stations. I also want to incorporate the use of baseballs with the sling Pitcher in our practices as the smaller ball should be harder to hit and provide even further tuning of hand-eye coordination to make sure our players are hitting the face of the softball. We can also achieve higher speeds with the baseballs, speeds the girls will see in 14u and beyond.

*Mitch Alexander is the CIO for a major electronics company and coaches both Little League and Travel softball teams and is currently completing his PhD. He is a certified SUNY, ASA, and Double Goal Coach. His wife, Marie was one of the first female student athletes in the country to play Little League softball after Title IX was passed and played in the first Little League Softball World Series. Over the years, both have managed teams together and helped spark a love for softball in their student athletes. In his spare time, Mitch designs websites for fastpitch teams and businesses and can be reached at [fastpitch2001@optonline.net](mailto:fastpitch2001@optonline.net).*



Your Dreams ~ Your Goals  
Your Work ~ Your Success



[www.GPSBasedGoals.com](http://www.GPSBasedGoals.com)  
Free eBook to help you reach your dreams

Download  
**Fastpitch**  
apps on your  
**phone** or  
**tablet** now!